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Angelica Whitehorne
The College at Brockport

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Biphobia

A CULTURE OF DELEGITIMIZING AND STIGMATIZING BISEXUALITY

ANGELICA WHITEHORNE

The LGBT community has made great strides in the U.S. in the past couple of years. The group is increasing its visibility in society through media and protests, demanding that they deserve “equal dignity in the eyes of the law” (Vogue, Diamond-CNN). The Marriage Act which was passed on June 26th, 2015 was a huge success in this battle of equality, making same-sex marriage legal and bringing justice to couples who could previously be refused legal matrimony (Vogue, Diamond- CNN). In addition to legal feats, LGBT populations are expressing pride with marches in many major cities including Brockport’s neighbors, Buffalo and Rochester. The growing advocacy groups both on college campuses and in the wider community have also been on the rise. Despite these advances the LGBT community still face discrimination and unacceptance from some populations. This depicts that there are still issues burdening this minority. One issue remaining is pertaining to the subgroup of bisexuals in the LGBT community. Bisexual individuals are still fighting for visibility and acceptance from both heterosexual and homosexual populations. This group’s deviance from singular gendered attraction often results in discrimination from both monosexual populations. The stigmas surrounding bisexuality as a “transitory phase” or promiscuous sexuality invalidates their identity and denies the existence of fluid sexualities (Brewster,16).

Bisexuality refers to the erotic, emotional, or sexual attractions to persons of more than one gender (Brewster, 12). Bisexuality can be seen from early human history. From Horace, a poet from the first century B.C.E to the Greek God Hercules to political figures like Julius Caesar in 44 BC. From then on it has reoccurred throughout humanity to modern day celebrities like Angelina Jolie and Frank Ocean (Famous Bisexuals). In addition to their longevity, bisexual individuals make up more than half of

the LGBT population (LGBTmap, 5). If bisexuality has been expressed for this long of a time and constitutes so much of the LGBT community then why are they still suffering from invisibility? It could be the sexuality's refusal to adhere to one gender romantically that threatens both of the monosexual populations. Bisexual's fluidity makes it harder to relate to either monosexual populations decreasing the amount of support and acceptance they receive from either group (Brewster, 16). One example of this exclusion is that in the previously mentioned feat of pride marches bisexuality has never received a specific march for their own representation. Although that is changing this year with Tel Aviv, a pride parade in Israel, it is still a long history with no grand scale parade recognition (LGBT weekly). The fact that it has taken until 2017 for bisexual individuals to receive their own pride march shows that bisexuality is marginalized in even the LGBT community.

Biphobia can be defined as "the negative attitudes, behaviors, and structures specifically directed toward anyone who is attracted to more than one gender" (The Bisexuality Report, 19). As previously stated this negativity is not relegated to stemming from only heterosexual people. Although just as with the rest of the LGBT community, "bisexual's face heteronormativity or the wider societal assumption that heterosexuality is the normal way of being," the "negative backlash" towards their identity can be received from the homosexual community. This is labeled as a "double discrimination" and makes it harder for bisexual people to find a community in which they are accepted (The Bisexuality Report, 18).

There are an abundance of stereotypes and stigmatizations surrounding bisexuality that contribute to biphobia. Bisexual people face judgment for defining

themselves outside of the romantic gender norm. Bisexuals in a hetero, monogamous relationship are assumed to be straight while those with same sex partners are thought to be in “denial of their homosexuality” (Brewster, 13). Bisexuality is delegitimized by the accusations that they are simply confused about their sexuality (Brewster, 15). Although lesbian, gay, and straight people may experiment with both genders before labeling their sexuality it is offensive to make bisexuality synonymous with experimentation. When bisexuality is equated with a kind of sexual confusion it is devaluing the fact that some people experience attraction outside of the monosexual norm. It also creates the notion that bisexuality is not a permanent and adequate sexuality to hold, another huge discrimination to those who identify with it.

There is also a stigma that a bisexual identity makes an individual unfit for relationships or naturally more promiscuous (Brewster, 13). Stereotyping one sexuality as “incapable of monogamy” because of their fluidity for partners is a hateful assumption that damages the reputation of individuals solely off of a stereotype. One example of this is the intense sexualizing bisexuality faces from the porn industry. In relation to female bisexuals in particular, the fetishizing of women engaging in sexual acts with a multitude of genders is related back to bisexuality. While this a scripted interaction that is not affiliated with the actualities of being bisexual the description of the content can include this identity as a way to entice certain crowds. (The Bisexuality Report, 20). When bisexuality is fetishized or used as prop for porn it not only reinforces the promiscuous stereotypes but also detracts from its creditability as real sexuality and not a sexualized practice. In addition to this, bisexual people are also seen as more likely to carry an STD which could also stem from the stereotypes

associated with porn. Lastly, they are classified as greedy for not adhering to a sole gender of partners. These aggressive stereotypes have no foundation as there is no proof that bisexual individuals are less monogamous than other sexualities (The Bisexuality Report, 20). Therefore, the stigma serves to once again delegitimize bisexuality and construct it as a sinful sexuality. The negative stereotypes are an injustice to a group who already struggles to be accepted or validated. All of the most common stereotypes associated with bisexuality are meant to demine or demonize the sexuality something that is common rhetoric for the rest of the LGBT community. However, the bisexual stereotypes remain unaddressed contributing to this group's invisibility and lack of support.

The stigmas surrounding bisexuals can have a negative impact on their mental health and become “detrimental” for healthy relationships (Brewster, 20). One experiment held by a scientist named Meyer concluded that the “expectation of stigma was related positively with several indicators of psychological distress” (Brewster, 22-23). The constant worrying of whether their bisexuality, an inherent and natural part of their identity, will be accepted is so intense that many individuals experience mental distress. The misinterpreting and stigmatizing of their sexuality can put bisexuals at a higher risk for mental illness. Again since the prejudice is received from both homosexual and heterosexual populations the disorders attributed to prejudice is increased among these individuals. (Brewster, 14). Some of the associated illnesses include “demoralization (sadness, dread, anxiety, helplessness, low self esteem, confused thinking), guilt, and, suicidal ideation/intent” (Brewster, 23-24). In addition to these ailments bisexuals are also found to have “higher rates of anxiety” and an

“increased self conscious” (Brewster, 17). Most concerning is the higher risk of suicide attempts amongst bisexuals, one experiment reported that they were 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than straight adults. (LGBTmap, 3

The studies show that being bisexual often takes an unhealthy toll on an individual's mental state. It is a disgrace in itself that identifying as a certain sexuality comes with “psychological consequences” however, the fact that bisexuals have to deal with these consequences with little awareness being brought to the issues is why the population is suffering from feelings of invalidation (Brewster, 17). Being excluded from the heteronormative culture as well as the gay and lesbian culture can isolate bisexuals and perpetuate the pattern of mental illness. Although more bisexuals suffer from mental illnesses they are less likely to come out to their health care providers. Fearful of stigmas against bisexual people they often withhold the information about their orientation that could help to treat their mental illnesses perpetuating the problem further.

Biphobia also occurs within the workplace creating another space of discrimination for the orientation. Bisexuals have a disproportionately higher rate of poverty and unemployment than other sexualities. A quarter of bisexual men live in poverty compared to only 15% of heterosexual and 20% of gay men. This number increases for bisexual women at 30% compared to 21% for straight women and 23% for gay women (LGBTmap, 2). These statistics display that bisexual people have a harder time gaining financial success or receiving employment. This sad fact could be attributed to factors such as discrimination or mental illness stemming from the repercussions of their orientation. For those who are offered employment, they continue to face discrimination.

Almost half of bisexual people have not disclosed their sexuality to their coworkers and 60% have reported hearing bisexual based jokes while in a work environment (LGBTmap, 2). Again these negative experiences lead to feelings of worthlessness and exclusion that are detrimental to the health of bisexuals.

Violence is also committed at a higher rate towards bisexuals. In a staggering percentage 46% of bisexual women have been raped compared to 13% of lesbian women and 17% of straight women. This statistic shows that bisexual women are approximately three times more likely to get raped than other women (LGBTmap, 2). The factors behind this increase could possibly be linked to the orientation's sexualized stereotypes or the otherwise negative emotions surrounding the sexuality that spurs on hate crimes. Whatever the cause the statistics depicts an extremely disadvantaged section of the LGBT community and calls for an increased awareness for the violence bisexuals face in order to combat it in the future.

Despite the continued invisibility of bisexuality, it has begun to make a rise in popular culture. Countless celebrities are identifying as bisexual. Stars such as Cara Delevingne, Miley Cyrus, Frank Ocean, and Angelina Jolie all have publicly come out as bisexual to millions of fans. Celebrities are often questioned about their sexuality as if this private and deeply personal aspect of self should be forced into the public sphere. The upside to these invasions is that many celebrities have become pioneers for dismantling the prominent bisexual invisibility seen in modern culture. Like with anything else young people look to celebrities to help them navigate their formative years, looking up to them as role models and learning from their example. When celebrities stand firm in their identity they help to validate and bring awareness to the sexuality. In

the past few years, there seems to be a new norm among celebrities to share their sexuality. Although it does not detract from the stigmas surrounding it, normalizing the sexuality through announcing it as a prideful part of your identity to a limitless audience does empower a marginalized group.

Celebrities are often noted for bringing attention to their cause and bisexual celebrities are no different. Anna Paquin from True Blood was quoted saying, "for me, it's [bisexuality] not really an issue because I'm someone who believes being bisexual is actually a thing. It's not made up. It's not a lack of decision" (Huffington Post).

Celebrities may appear to be fearless in their approaches to coming out but it is still a sensitive and risky action for their career. The first famous rapper to make public his feelings of sexual attraction to both genders on such a large scale was Frank Ocean. His newest release "Slide" features the lyric "I see both sides like Chanel" symbolizing his bisexuality. However, his coming out did not occur without trepidation. He said himself that "you worry about people in the business who you've heard talk that way." This quote alludes to the homophobic and/or biphobic comments he has heard in the business. He goes on to discuss how he rejects labels and has contemplated whether the coming out letter he posted would affect his career (Huffington Post). The freedom of sexuality he expressed took faith in his fans not to discriminate against him for his identity. Coming out as bi in a genre of music that bases its success off the sexual conquer of females was a revolutionary action. Incorporating his sexual identity into lyrics that now stray from the intensely heteronormative content creates a space for bisexuality in the genre. Frank Ocean's publicity proves to be a positive example of celebrities bringing attention and acceptance to bisexuality.

Frank Ocean's coming out culminated in positive attention for the bisexual community. However, other celebrities have been questioned to identify as bisexual simply to bring attention to their personal lives. Nothing can be proven around whether an individual is labeling themselves for identity purposes or for their image. Since bisexuality is seen as a rebellion or as a wild sexuality a lot of young stars can be seen as very vocal about their multi-gendered relationships. In tabloids there is often stories about stars possibly being bisexual and often these stories are accompanied by visuals that depict said star as 'spiraling out of control'. The media's portrayal of young people experimenting with their sexuality brings negative attention to the bisexual community and reinforces the malignant stereotypes. When celebrities seem to exploit these images to further their public persona it is disrespectful to those struggling to be accepted for their identity.

One quote from David Bowie says "it's true -- I am a bisexual. But I can't deny that I've used that fact very well. I suppose it's the best thing that ever happened to me." This quote portrays the complex relationship between celebrities and coming out as bisexual. Unlike those without fame celebrities can utilize the wild stigma of bisexuality to construct for themselves the kind of persona that gives celebrities more attention. With David Bowie his bisexuality was a legitimate aspect of his identity but he does recognize the way in which it inevitably affected his career and persona.

It is possible that celebrities building their famous persona's either around or including bisexuality in itself doesn't have to be inherently negative. Perhaps the media's portrayal of bisexuality as promiscuous, confused, or overtly sexualized is a slight of the media and not the celebrity. Perhaps the notion that celebrities use the

sexuality to gain attention is another fundamental condemnation of both the celebrities and the sexuality in itself. Bowie says he benefitted from the attention he received from coming out as bi or being otherwise ambiguous with his sexuality but the bi community also benefited from it. One Bowie fan commented “I cannot quantify precisely the effect he has had on the increasing visibility of gay and trans peoples throughout the world, but there are few figures, at least in the influential world of pop culture, that I’d give more credit to for expanding the boundaries of what we think of as beautiful” (Wicks). The support and recognition Bowie advocated for through his performances, art, and selfhood made being bisexual or outside the labels of society more acceptable. He decreased the invisibility of bisexuals and normalized a more fluid sexuality. One should not detract from his advocacy because of the boost his career received from his commitment to his sexuality.

The ideals of what sexuality should be is forced upon bisexual individuals. The lack of support and understanding most bisexuals receive for their identity causes mental ailments and sometimes physical damage to the individual. The double discrimination forced upon bisexuals creates a “monosexual privilege” for straight, lesbian, and gay populations. This means that the monosexual populations need to formulate strategies to become better allies for bisexuals. Not enforcing detrimental and insubstantial stereotypes is the first way allies can help bisexuals feel validated. Next there needs to be more attention given to the hardships bisexuals specifically face and movements to make sure bisexuality doesn’t get lost in the LGBT acronym. Lastly, monosexuals can utilize their privilege to open their minds and support more fluid sexualities, recognizing that it is as valid and concrete of a sexuality as their own. These

steps would eventually ease the biphobia expressed in our society and create a more diverse and accepting atmosphere.

In conclusion, the stigmas surrounding bisexuality for not adhering to a single gendered attraction is a form of delegitimizing the identity with negative associations. By labeling bisexuals as promiscuous, confused, or sexual experimenters it devalues the sexualities respectable and natural existence. The mental and physical repercussions of these biases prove the detrimental effects these stigmas and exclusion have on the bi community. The recent LGBT legal advances and the awareness brought to the sexuality through celebrities has helped to decrease its invisibility however there needs to be more positive awareness brought to the sexuality. With the assistance of allies and advocacy the bi community can debunk the negative stereotypes and explain the legitimacy of their sexuality and in return receive the respect their orientation deserves.

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